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ABSTRACT

Survivors of sexual abuse are likely to be among the participants of many adventure and experiential programs. This paper aims to increase outdoor leaders' understanding of the possible reactions of survivors to adventure experiences and related group interactions. Long-term effects of sexual violence are pervasive and may be triggered by the unusual experiences in adventure programs. These effects include flashbacks of emotions or physical sensations of abuse; dissociation of mind, body, and spirit; feelings of loss of control; anger, turned inward or outward; shame; lack of trust; and difficulties with personal boundaries. Participants may be limited in their ability to withdraw from activities. Corporate and school groups may require 100 percent participation. Adolescent girls, in particular, may be reluctant to speak up about their discomfort, and instead, may try to influence the group to withdraw. Challenge is something of a "sacred cow" in experiential education; some rethinking should be done about providing true "challenge by choice" and about the nature of success in challenge activities. Practical suggestions are offered in relation to the extent of touching during initiatives, the importance of cleanliness to survivors, feelings of lack of control due to environmental elements such as weather or insects, nudity, and sleeping arrangements. Contains 14 references. (SV)

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Adventure Programming and Facilitating when You Don't Know Your Participant is a Survivor of Sexual Abuse

Denise Mitten

To many outdoor leaders and educators, the wilderness represents home. Many people choose this profession in order to help others receive the gifts of the wilderness and experience the joys of "coming home." Personal growth using these techniques has often been related to participants completing challenges.

In contrast, for a person who has been sexually abused, the challenge of a ropes course element or initiative or an outdoor situation can make her or him feel "out of her or his element" and trigger feelings of fear, being out of control, or invasion. These experiences can trigger memories and put the survivor in a situation that feels like domination and control by another person.

A leader's understanding of possible reactions that survivors of sexual abuse (hereafter referred to as "survivors") may have to a ropes course or wilderness experience and to group interactions can greatly influence the success of the experience for everyone.

This information is intended to create an awareness for leaders and facilitators who work with groups that include general populations of women and men. Studies show that at least 38% of girls and one out of every seven boys is sexually abused by someone designated as a caretaker before the child is 18 years old. Every 45 seconds a woman is raped. Therefore survivors are likely to be on most all outdoor and other experiential programs—perhaps as many as one out of every three participants may be survivors.

Long-term effects of sexual violence

Long-term effects of sexual violence are pervasive. Survivors may go through many healing times, only to find that issues surface again. Some survivors go through life not remembering the incident(s) until or unless an unusual experience triggers memories. Ropes course experiences, outdoor trips, and initiatives are designed to be "unusual." Therefore these experiences have high potential to trigger memories.

Some long-term effects of sexual violence commonly faced by survivors, with examples of ways each of these issues may surface, are listed below.

• *Flashbacks or re-experiences of emotions or physical sensations of the abuse.* Being tied into a rope may trigger lack of control or fear as the survivor may have been tied for the abuse. Blindfolds can trigger fear because the abuse may have occurred in the dark and/or she may have had a hand or handkerchief covering her eyes.

• *Dissociation or a separation of mind, body, and spirit, including a "numbing" of emotions.* When in a situation that is scary for a survivor, dissociation can occur. She may not trust or adequately assess her fear level, appearing to have too great or too little fear for the situation.

• *Control over one's environment or one's choices.* Some survivors feel that when there are too many unknowns (what will the weather be, who will carry what, how will we find camp, will we have enough food) they feel anxious and fearful. This may result in behavior that looks "controlling" such as hoarding food, asking many questions, carrying more then her/his share, or else may manifest as complete ambivalence about schedule and rules.

• *Anger/rage.* Most survivors feel deep anger or even rage about their experiences. However, many women turn their anger inward. Behaviors such as eating disorders, belittling oneself, depression, self-mutilation, acting out sexually can indicate anger turned inward. In experiential situations designed to call forth emotions, anger either turned outward or inward may be exaggerated in survivors.

• *Shame.* Survivors may feel they somehow caused or could have prevented the abuse. Survivors may believe that failure on an initiative or a summit attempt was their fault. Survivors can feel shame for not knowing rules or how to do tasks before the tasks are taught or explained.

• *Trust.* Survivors have had trust violated. They may not understand trust or may not be trusting of others, which can make it hard for them to relate to the facilitator, other group leaders, and/or other group members.

• *Boundaries.* Survivors have had their boundaries violated dramatically. The impact often is either blurred or rigid boundaries. For example survivors may be prone to more disclosure than appropriate (physical and emotional) for the level of relationship. This can be off-putting for some group members and cause splitting, cliques, or scape-goating. Some survivors have difficulty saying no; others say no most of the time, creating a rigid boundary.

Participation considerations

In corporate groups, school groups and others, clients cannot necessarily self-select out of an experience. The CEO may expect 100% participation. Mitten (1996), Rohde (1996), and Lenskyj (1995) have written about their concerns of ethics and the practicality of using challenge oriented programs for girls and women.

For adolescent survivors, the risk of speaking up to opt out of an experience may feel too great. Also, it is common for adolescent girls and women to not want to show their body in a co-ed group. Adolescent girls often decide to become less physical. Girls are usually far more concerned with fitting in than with expressing individual voices. One way an adolescent girl can opt out of an experience is to influence all the girls not to want to participate. Therefore a survivor can orchestrate a complete "participation rebellion." From her point of view and from a mental heath perspective, given the constraints of the situation, the survivor is exhibiting creative and positive self-respecting behavior. However, this outcome may confuse or irritate a facilitator.

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The utility of challenge

Challenge is possibly a "sacred cow" in experiential education. Many experiential educators like challenge and see benefits from challenging experiences. I suggest reconstructing challenge. Does climbing the wall, even if "afraid" mean "success" and that the participant has overcome her fear? Does forcing oneself to look comfortable being nude at a group swim indicate success? Does refraining from asking questions and "trusting" that the information needed will be given indicate success?

For example, in a challenge by choice program, is a woman applauded and cheered when she says no? Or does she get a nod and "sure, it is your choice; when you are comfortable trying the activity let me know"? The latter response indicates that she is a failure until she completes the activity, even though you "allow" her to be a failure.

Are participants given metaphors, such as climbing this wall will signify your overcoming drugs, divorce, whatever? Or are participants encouraged to use their own skills for reflection, perhaps not even using a metaphor?

Practical applications

• Touching is a part of many initiatives. Men often bond by physical "rough-housing," and touching in initiatives can fit with that norm. More often women, and especially women who have been sexually abused, find that touching early on in a relationship can feel invasive or be misinterpreted. Sometimes having non-touching initiatives or separating the group members by sex can be helpful.

• Cleanliness is often important to survivors. Being "dirty," including feeling sweaty, reminds some of their abuse and can stimulate feelings of shame and fear. Pre-think ways to introduce cleanliness early in the course and set a tone for respecting individuals needs. Sun showers, a structure norm of hand washing before food preparation, time for relaxing and bathing, and offering other practical tips for self-care can all help support the notion of cleanliness.

• Environmental elements such as insects and weather can trigger feelings of loss, lack of control or invasion. Practical information from leaders, such as when and how to apply insect repellent, which camping spot might or might not be buggy, how to pack and use rain gear can also aid in participants being more comfortable.

• Nudity can be optional or down-played by the leaders. One leader can choose to stay clothed, modeling a non-nude option.

• Sleeping arrangements with someone of a different sex can be uncomfortable or scary. Sleeping under tarps when insects allow, encouraging same sex sleeping partners, having clear night time bathroom guidelines, and encouraging participants to sleep with flashlights and raingear can be helpful.

Summary

Some behavior in survivors may make leaders conclude that the survivor does not appreciate the group (non-desire to be touched or close, preference to sleep with one's own sex, refusal or discomfort about being nude in the group), appreciate the outdoors (fear or irritation with weather or insects), or respect low impact camping and traveling techniques (need for cleanliness). This attitude on the part of the leader can cause scape-goating and a feeling of isolation for the survivor.

With an understanding of how experiential settings can affect survivors of sexual abuse, outdoor leaders can help women and men experience the healing qualities of nature. Through a positive experiences, survivors can learn to manage themselves in environments that feel out of control. They can experience their traumatized bodies as powerful, supportive, and full of vital information. Sensitive, aware, and respectful leaders are key elements in the quality of the outdoor experience.

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